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The Indonesia Human Rights Campaign

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The Right Hon. Sir Geoffrey Howe, MP,
Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office,
King Charles Street,
London SW1

Dear Sir Geoffrey,

At its meeting in Geneva last August, the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities adopted a resolution which, among other things, recommended that the UN Commission on Human Rights should "study carefully at its forty-fourth session the evolution of the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms in East Timor". We are in particular encouraged to know that the initiative for this resolution was taken by the British expert on the Sub-Commission, Mr Ben Whitaker.

We write now to urge you most strongly to instruct the British delegation to the forthcoming meeting of the Commission on Human Rights to support the inclusion of East Timor on its agenda and to ensure the adoption of a resolution condemning the continued violation of human rights in East Timor, perpetrated by the Indonesian forces of occupation.

We would like to draw your attention to the statement made by Pope John Paul II on 14 December 1987 when receiving the credentials of the Indonesian ambassador, on which occasion he declared: "The Church's universal mission of service leads her to hope that particular consideration will be given to the protection of the ethnic, religious and cultural character of the people of East Timor." Moderate as these words are, they are a clear admonition of the Indonesian authorities in East Timor, and were recognised as such by the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Dr. Mochtar Kususmaatmadja, who responded the next day by publicly accusing the Pope of being "misinformed and one-sided".

In addition to the constant flow of information about yet more arrests and other violations in East Timor that continue to reach us, we believe that the Pope's statement reflects deep disquiet in the Catholic Church about conditions in East Timor. One source of this disquiet is certain to have been the representations by P.J. Dijkstra SJ, a highly-respected Catholic religious in Indonesia, made on behalf of Mgr Ximenes Belo, Apostolic Administrator in East Timor, to a meeting last August of Masri, the Indonesian Council of Religious Superiors. According to an official document of that meeting, a copy of which is in our possession, Father Dijkstra made the following grave observations:

"Since East Timor's integration into Indonesia, major and rapid changes have taken place in the economic and social-cultural systems of society.

The most prominent social change is the shift away from the domination of religion and religious leaders who originally had a decisive influence in the community. The fact is that now another religion is growing alongside the changes that are taking place, and the influence of religious leaders long established in society has gradually been dissipated (memudar).

"There is a change in attitude of state officials towards society, whilst for its part, the community does not yet have the courage openly to articulate its opinions and wishes to the government or to Church leaders, all of which makes life increasing oppressive (mencekam).

"Certain officials do not take account of conditions in the area and behave in a disreputable way; some pursue private missions all of which offends and hurts the community."

Through Father Dijkstra, Mgr Belo made a plea for freedom of movement for Catholic pastors, brothers, sisters and lay-people in the performance of their pastoral activities, so as to enable the Church to play its role in resolving problems and restoring a sense of peace.

Concern about the diminishing role of the Church is obviously related to the fact that ever since the Indonesian invasion in 1975, the Church has been the sole protector and support for Timorese in those parts of the country under Indonesian occupation, in the face of human rights violations and atrocities perpetrated by the forces of occupation.

These remarks strike us as being very alarming. They reflect a serious situation not spelt out in detail, at least in the written document to which we have access. We feel the only way to examine thoroughly the disquiet of the Church would be for the UN Commission on Human Rights, as a matter of urgency, to initiate investigations about human rights and the social and political conditions of the East Timorese people. May we suggest that this should be a focus of the resolution to be adopted by the Commission at its forty-fourth session in February this year.

Yours sincerely,

Carmel Budiardjo,
Organising Secretary